DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 721 CS 214 016

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TITLE Students' Right to Their Language: Distinguishing Patterns and Varieties.
PUB DATE [89]
NOTE 19p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Conference on English Education (Minneapolis, MN, March 17, 1978).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Curriculum Development; *English Instruction; Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Linguistic Theory; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Standard Spoken Usage; Student Needs; Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; *English Teachers

ABSTRACT

The wide gap that exists between linguists and English teachers accounts for some of the difficulty involved in determining whether or not students "have a right to their own language." Linguists generally concern themselves with cognitive sufficiency; whereas, English teachers, concerned with behavioral sufficiency, encounter language within the context of its use. The responsibility of the teacher to the speaker of a nonstandard dialect lies in two areas, teaching spoken English and teaching written English. Four conceivable goals of teaching spoken English are: eradicationism: the students would control Standard English and give up Nonstandard English; the student would give up Nonstandard English but would not be explicitly taught Standard English; bidialectalism: the students would be taught Standard English and allowed to retain Nonstandard English; or the student would retain Nonstandard English and Standard English would not be taught. With respect to the teaching of written English, various stages of development must be considered as well as the social and institutional contexts within which the writing is taking place. The basic generalities which apply to these two areas imply that patterns and varieties of English that genuinely reflect "the dialects of students' nurture in which they find their own identity and style" must be identified before a valid discussion of students' rights to their own language can take place. (Two appendixes provide samples of student writing.) (NH)

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ED 361 721

STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR LANGUAGE:

DISTINGUISHING PATTERNS AND VARIETIES

Bethany K. Dumas
Darrell H. Garber

We are somewhat puzzled by the topic of this session.[1] Indeed the longer we worked on our presentation the more we wondered why we were doing it, for as we surveyed the literature--as we looked at the journal articles and as we reviewed the titles of other presentations of other panelists at other national meetings--we felt a profound sense of déjá vue. Some of us have discussed today's question, "Do Students Have a Right to Their Own Language?" publicly since 1974 or even earlier. Surely, we thought, we all know the answers to that by now.

It was finally the awareness that the answers to the question are plural that led us to the stance we take today. Briefly, our stance is this: We perceive a wide gap between linguists on the one hand and English teachers on the other. We are certain that the existence of that gap contributes to a situation in which persons most knowledgeable about language are often denied any voice in what goes on in the English classroom, particularly the freshman English or composition classroom. On the university level, the literary bias of most graduate

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was read before the conference on English Education on March 17, 1978, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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departments of English certainly plays a role in this situation. Generally, a national obsession with what are felt to be the all-powerful capabilities of common sense plays a large role. There are reasons for the latter obsession, one of which is probably the generally antiprescriptivist view of English grammar on the part of linguists. Gleason's statement of more than a decade ago remains largely true:

> The first introduction to linguistics for most English teachers was in the context of controversy first over authoritarianism, then usage, and later broadened to include the content of grammar instruction. The opponents of the old doctrine of correctness had brought in the "findings of linguistic science" as the chief witness for the prosecution. It was perhaps inevitable that, for many teachers, linguistics should be rather narrowly identified with antiprescriptivism. In the heat of battle both friends and foes emphasized certain features of linguistics disproportionately. As a result, much of the English profession got a constrained and distorted view of the scope and significance of the science. For some it was merely an ally ready to provide arguments with a aura of scientific authority. For the conservatives--including a large segment of the general public--it was

> merely a pseudoscience created to justify permissiveness in language and to undercut standards. (Gleason 1965:22-23)

With that in mind, it is easy to understand the hostility generated in 1974 by the action of the membership of the CCCC in adopting the Resolution on Students' Right to Their Own Language:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a Standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural an racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm that teachers must have the experience and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

And, in retrospect, it is also easy to understand the unhappiness generated in many quarters by the subsequent

publication of the background statement, a statement which many of us now feel errs in failing to distinguish adequately between cognitive and behavioral sufficiency. Linguists generally concern themselves only with the former, and the authors of the background statement took too little notice, to our way of thinking, of behavioral implications of language patterns. The following paragraph could not be more capable of generating hostility among English teachers if it had been designed specifically for that purpose:

> There is no evidence, in fact, that enables us to describe any language or any dialect as incomplete or deficient apart from the conditions of its use. (Committee on CCCC Language Statement 1974: 9; emphasis ours)

The objection stems, of course, from the very real fact that only the professional linguist (or student of linguistics) encounters language "apart from the condition of its use." Everyone else encounters language very much within the context of its use and knows perfectly well that dialects are unequal, just as languages are unequal in any real context.

But the background statement has served its purpose, which was, as we see it, to generate discussion of a crucial topic: What is the responsibility of the teacher to the speaker of a nonstandard dialect? The teacher's responsibility begins, we

feel, with the recognition that implicit in that topic are at least two questions: 1) What is the responsibility of the teacher with respect to the teaching of spoken English? and 2) What is the responsibility of the teacher with respect to the teaching of written English? There are four possible answers to the first question; they have been neatly spelled out by Wolfram and Fasold:

> Exhausting the logical possibilities, there are four conceivable goals of teaching spoken English. Of these, one has been the historic goal of educators and has only been questioned recently [sic], two are recently proposed and quite controversial, and the remaining goal is nonsense. [Figure 1] displays the four goals in terms of the control of language an individual should have as a result of the spoken language curriculum. The cell labeled 1 means the individual should control Standard English and should have given up Nonstandard English. Cell 2 means that Nonstandard English would be eradicated, but Standard English not explicitly taught. Cell 3 corresponds to the goal of teaching Standard English while allowing the retention of the nonstandard dialect, and 4 indicates the retention of nonstandard dialect as a goal without the teaching of Standard English. Of the

four, cell 2 can be dismissed as nonsense. To attempt to eradicate Nonstandard English without teaching Standard English in its place would entail the student's becoming mute as a result of the spoken language curriculum! As ridiculous as this sounds, it appears that some teachers, in trying to achieve the goal designated by cell 1, inadvertently come closer to the goal of cell 2, achieving the "mute child" result. Certainly no teacher would intentionally aim at such a result, but by constantly correcting nonstandard speech without providing effective Standard English instruction, some teachers convince children that it is better to not respond [sic] in school at all rather than risk having every sentence correct.

The cell 1 goal, called <u>eradicationism</u>, is the one historically accepted by educators. Indeed, it probably has not occurred to some educators that any other alternative is possible.... Much of the motivation for setting this goal is based on the conviction that Nonstandard English is a corruption of Standard English that leads to cognitive deficits and learning disabilities. The indefensibility of this view weakens the position of eradicationism as a goal. Another incentive for the eradicationist approach is based on the premise that Nonstandard English, although

perhaps linguistically the equal of the standard dialects, still confers a social stigma on its speakers, and should therefore be eliminated in order to eliminate the stigma and allow the student full opportunity to enter the mainstream of society....

Bidialectalism, the goal indicated by cell 3, means that Standard English is to be taught, but with no effort to eradicate the student's native nonstandard dialect.... Unlike the eradicationist position, the bidialectalism position overtly rejects the notion that Nonstandard English is inherently inferior. Like the eradicationist position, it assumes that social stigmatization of Nonstandard English is both significant and inevitable.... The majority of sociolinguists who have studied social dialects advocate the bidialectalist position.

The goal designated by cell 4 calls for the retention of Nonstandard English with no attempt to teach Standard English either as a replacement dialect or a second dialect. Advocates of this goal reject the notion that Nonstandard English is inherently inferior...., but they also reject the idea that language prejudice is significant and inevitable.

There is no "safe" position among these proposals. Advocates of eradicationism face the ire of all who

> accept the legitimacy of nonstandard dialects. To accept bidialectalism invites the criticism of traditional educators and language purists on the one hand and of the more outspoken members of minority communities and their allies on the other. Taking the position that Standard English should not be taught or that nonstandard dialect should be taught means being resisted by all those who for one reason or another believe in the importance of Standard English in American society. (1974: 179-182)

On the face of it, it appears that there are also four answers to the second question, that involving the responsibility of the teacher with respect to the teaching of written English. But there are four and only four possible answers to that question only if we posit a social context in which many speakers use a variety of written Standard English at least equal to what Labov has specified as the fifth and penultimate stage in the acquisition of spoken Standard English, that stage being mastery of the consistent standard. Stage 5 is different from stages 1 - 3—the basic grammar, the vernacular, and the social perception—in that not all speakers reach the point of development indicated by it; it is like stage 4—control of stylistic variation—in that it is apparently reached only by speakers who attain "exposure to a group larger than the neighborhood group" (Labov 1964:91), an

exposure which usually occurs in the first year of high school. Stage 4 development is sometimes reached by speakers who have had no more than one year of high school; stage 5 development "is acquired primarily by the middle class group" (p. 92). Middle class speakers normally, of course, have more than one year of high school. It is important to recall that there is only one stage beyond stage 5, acquisition of the full range, apparently limited to "mostly college educated persons with special interest in speech," (p.92), and it is imperative to note that in New York City, at least, attainment of the full range appears to be accompanied by "a certain rigidity of linguistic style; few of these speakers seem to have retained the ability to 'switch downwards' to their original vernacular" (p.92).

Clearly the social situation we have posited is not true; most people <u>do not</u> reach a stage of development in the acquisition of <u>written</u> English analogous to acquisition of the consistent standard in <u>spoken</u> English. Many quite useful and productive members of society do very little writing after the cessation of their formal education. Others write within the context of institutions (e.g., the federal government, the military) which rigidly specify format and style. So varied are individuals' capabilities where the acquisition of written Standard English is concerned that we have not until recently recognized for practical purposes a greater complexity than "literate" vs. "illiterate" or "traditional" vs.

"nontraditional," at least for most nonprofessional persons. Recently, however, we have become aware that at least college and university students exhibit a wider range of talents and capabilities where written English is concerned.

That range is not visible in any division of students into two groups, traditional and nontraditional. And we do not have to explain to you the various euphemistic senses in which the latter term is often employed. The dichotomy is false, however, no matter what possible euphemistic function we invoke when we use the term "nontraditional." During the past eight years one of the authors of this paper has taught at three universities in the southern and southwestern United States; the largest state-supported black university in the country, a small and very expensive private university, and a large state university. At these institutions, she has been able to identify at least five kinds of students, based on a tentative survey of the dialect, register, and syntax of their expository prose. Not included in the group are any students whose first language is not English. We want to describe and in some cases give examples of the kinds of writing involved, in order to begin to suggest the kinds of complexity implicit in the question, "Do Students Have a Right to Their Own Language?"

1.) The so called traditional students may be recognized by the fact that they write in sentences in what may

be called Standard English, keeping in mind that for the first-year college or university student Standard English is likely to be the result of the informal standardization of language (we use the term as William Stewart does) which takes place without benefit of books and academies and is, therefore, harder to describe than the result of the formal standardization (again, as Stewart used the term) which is based on the written language of well-established writers. Basically, however, it is the colloquial speech of the middle class transferred to the written form; as a written variety of English, it moves toward the formal, especially in such matters as who-whom distinctions, are-deletion (in a question like "Where you going?"), and preposition placement.

2.) A second type of student writes expository prose that looks, at first glance, much like that of the "traditional" student. These students write in a kind of Standard English, and they write in what appear to be sentences. Closer examination reveals, however, that they are actually composing in clauses rather than sentences. Consider this brief discussion of Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility:

> Marianne's strength of emotion is further shown by her nonattempt to eat anything at breakfast, a point which Mrs. Jennings fails to note due to Elinors [sic]

> steadying hand being able to get Mrs. Jennings to devote her attention to Elinor during it. (Turner 1973:231)

This kind of writing which goes largely undiscussed in handbooks. A stylistician analyzes it thus:

> The chief weakness is in connectives. Apart from which, an element in the colourless complex connective a point which, only prepositions and participles are usual, so that a clotted collection of frozen nominal groups takes the place of finite verbs. The use of simple conjunctions (because rather than due to....ing, 'when she does not attempt' rather then 'by her nonattempt') is a first step to lucidity. There are further awkwardnesses in pronoun reference and the precariously metaphorical 'steadying hand'. The sentence needs recasting. Since Marianne's emotion is already (as we see from the word further) the topic of discourse, it need not be mentioned again. The main new statement seems to be that Marianne does not eat breakfast and so we may begin (keeping the student's present tense) 'Marianne eats nothing at breakfast....' We now find that it is not easy to 'correct' a sentence like this, because we must make it more precise, and we have insufficient guidance. 'A point which' requires a

> conjunction to replace it, either but or though according to what was meant. Perhaps ...but Mrs. Jennings does not notice because Elinor diverts her attention omits nothing of value in the rest of the student's sentence. What seemed complicated was really a simple statement, capable, if necessary, of further modification. (Turner, p. 232).

Time will not permit even a cursory examination of the remaining types of writing today. Briefly, they include the following additional categories.

3.) A kind of writing that is produced under pressure by persons who do not speak even informal Standard English and who attempt to writing it only in highly artificial situations such as the English classroom. It is always characterized by the presence of these two features:

a. A high number of "nonstandard" spoken English features.
b. A significant number of apparently random hypercorrections (e.g., salesmans, incorrect use of I in statements like "It was just made for you and I.")

It is difficult to give such writing a label. It is possible to dismiss it by saying that it is "not English," of course, but that seems grossly unfair to the writer when it is pretty certainly a variety of written English that results predictably,

in certain classroom situations, and in response to years of highly ineffective and probably random, or at least erratic "correction" of nonstandard patterns. See Appendix I for a example of an essay written in this style.

The other two categories are:

4.) Written examples closely approximating spoken Black English. See Appendix II for an example of an essay written in this style.

5.) Edited Black Vernacular, approximating informal Standard English.

Note that the last two types are similar in that they are written in sentences, sentences generated in accordance with the systematic rules of the dialects in which they are written; neither is written in Standard English. Note also that 2 and 3 are similar in that they are written in clauses rather than sentences.

The implications of these generalizations for our topic seem clear. Before we talk sensibly about students' right to their "own language," we must be confident that we can identify patterns and varieties of English that genuinely reflect "the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style." In retrospect, "dialects" seems an unfortunate word here. Patterns and varieties of language which imply identity and style clearly involve notions of register and syntax in a complex way.

in a follow-up to this paper we plan to offer a list of the stages in the acquisition of standard written English and to explore within the framework afforded by that list three questions: 1) Is there such a thing as written Appalachian English? 2) If so, what are its identifying characteristics and how symptomatic are they of communication problems between speakers of Appalachian English and speakers of other varieties of English? 3) What do we do about it?

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Appendix I

Death of a Salesman

My answer to this question is that Willy Lowman is a failure in any ways, because he is to old for the job and can't keep up with the rest of the Salesmans. He wants to live his son life for them. Biff he wants to be a Salesman. Happy he himself wants a car, apartment an a lot of womens. He braggs on Biff telling him he have an outstanding personality for a Salesman.

He brings them up staling, telling them his brother Ben went into the jungle and when he came out he was rich. He tells Bernard daddy Biff is better than his son Bernard in many ways, such as a outstanding quarterback, an a Salesman. He wants his son Biff to work for Bill Oliver, in which he never gets the job. Willy Lowman always wanted to see things his way, but never see it the other person way. He say how people in the neighborhood like his son Biff. His son Biff wouldn't have not been a failure, if he would have stop bragging on him. He tells Biff, Bernards gets the best marked in school but when he gets out into the business world, that he would be ahead of Bernard five times. Charley offers Willy Lowman a job but he refuses it, he say he need no help from him. In the end of story he commits suicide, he drive the car off and kills himself.

Appendix II

Movies Prices Are To High

You probably went to a movies which the picture is not worth going seeing. Not only was picture not good, but the price was entirely too high.

Today movies prices are entirely to high to me. Because the picture the people be showing is not worth it. If you going to pay that much for a movies you should at lease have a cut on the prices of the food. Some movies you cannot bring food inside of the places, but they expected you pay that big price to buy popcorn, and drinks. About time you pay to go see the movies you could have brought you a complete dinner.

Not only the food is high, but you cannot sit in a nice clean room. But still you pay that very high price to get inside the place. I expect you should be able to sit in a very clean building for the price you pay to come inside the place.

Another reason got again paying such a high price, is that the people at the movies be throwing popcorn and ices all in hour head. They can at lease do something about people throwing food all over you. The only thing the person might say, will you please stop throwing food every where. What they should do is throw the person out of movies. You not paying that much money to come to a movie and get food strains all on your clothes and hair.

Some of the people who work at the theatre have a very bad attitude toward you. If you going to paid two dollar and something to a movies, you should at lease be waited on with a very nice attitude. The people who worked their sometime jerk you money out of your hand. When you tell them very nicely that they did not give you the right changes, they probably give you a very smart remark. They should give you some respect.

Most of the bathroom you have to paid to get inside,. Why should you have paid to use the bathroom, after you have paid that high prices to get inside the places. Sometime the bathroom is half nasty and don't have any toilet paper. Paper all over the floor and the floor is not clean.

I feel that movies prices should go down, because it is not worth that much money. Or they probably will not be in business to long, if they do not bring their prices down a little lower. Because people today can afford that much money to go the movies.